

Little Hoover Commission Testimony
Presented by Patricia Curry
Commissioner on Children and Families
October 30, 2002

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My testimony is based on my 12 years of experience in Los Angeles County working as a Commissioner on the Commission for Children and Families, a C.A.S.A. Volunteer and an advocate for children and specifically in response to the three areas you have asked me to address.

- I. Please describe for the Commission what you believe should be the goals for the foster care system and how the public will know when the children in foster care have all the opportunities and support they need. In other words, how will the public know when the foster care system is working appropriately? Please discuss the outcomes that you think the public should expect for children and families served by the foster care system and how the public should best be informed of those outcomes?*

Goals

There is really only one goal for foster care and that is permanency. Prevention, safety, outcomes and indeed foster care itself should all be tools and services to help the County achieve this goal. The goal for each and every child should be to have a permanent, safe, stable home with a biological family or with a family created for them through adoption, guardianship or relative care. No child should be allowed to grow up in long term foster care.

The Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families (Commission), through various task forces and Committees, has done extensive work reviewing programs and services provided to children and families in the child welfare and probation systems. As a result, the Commission has made recommendations to improve foster care in L.A. County. A number of these recommendations involve strategies to achieve permanency, and keeping children safe by providing quality care while permanency is sought.

In the year 2000, Vivian Weinstein, a long time advocate for foster children in L.A. County, brought together an ad hoc group consisting of some current and past Commissioners from the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families, Commissioners from the Los Angeles City Commission for Children Youth and Families, Members of the Children's Planning Council and other child advocates. Her goal was to develop strategies for changing the foster care system by drawing on their collected years of experience on the commissions and the Council. The result was a paper titled "From Child Welfare to Child Well Being". The concepts laid out what many advocates feel are the necessary steps for improving the foster care system, and a policy for what all children need to thrive. This document contains information that does not need to be duplicated in my testimony. I have therefore highlighted the main points below and added those concepts that are not included in the body of work. I have also attached the paper as part of my testimony.

Once we accept the goal of **Permanency**, we are then challenged to design a system capable of achieving this goal. Such a system would include preventive mechanisms and **Community based** placements for children, using **Technology** to assist us in developing **Outcomes** to insure oversight and accountability.

Prevention

The concept of **Permanency** begins prior to children and families entering the foster care system by addressing issues of poverty, neglect, substance abuse, and the stresses placed on families that contribute to their deterioration. Some of the programs that can assist with prevention, which should be developed in each community are:

- Home visits for all prenatal families and new parents
- Developing appropriate high quality affordable child care
- Family empowerment zones
- Enhanced home visitation
- Family support and counseling
- Substance abuse treatment
- Family centered programs like Family Preservation, Family Support and Family Group Decision Making

If these preventive mechanisms are not successful and foster care is the only way to ensure child safety, concurrent planning should begin immediately to lessen the time a child is in the system.

Community-based Approach

Once in the foster care system, the provision of service should emphasize a child focus and strength based approach. Children need to be treated with great care, honoring their relationships and their need for safety and stability. We need to have a system focused on embracing and celebrating their achievements and focused on their hopes, plans, goals and opportunities as we would with our own children. Since these are “our” children and the future adults of “our” communities, we must provide them with positive experiences and not deprive them of opportunities to have normal childhood experiences while we are seeking a permanent home for them.

The trauma children experience when removed from their family of origin can be minimized through community- based placements, which allow children to remain connected to family, friends and in an environment in which they feel comfortable, while permanency is sought. The development of community-based placements that allow sibling to be placed together is essential so that children remain connected to their families. Community-based placements also allow for consistency in other critical aspects of a child’s life, including education, medical care and social support systems. It is crucial that children continue to attend the same school to avoid academic disruption and to provide a solid foundation for educational success and future employment opportunities, ensuring successful lives. Health care should be provided by the

same physician who has first hand knowledge of a child's medical history to ensure consistent and appropriate medical care, vital to a child's health. Consistency in having a child remain with the same professional in the delivery of mental health services is also crucial.

Of equal importance is building the capacity of each community to have the necessary resources and support systems to meet the unique needs of children and families who are under the supervision of the dependency system or are at risk of being removed from their families. If the resources do not exist in a community, it is incumbent upon the County to develop those services and strengthen each community's capacity to do so. Matching children with the critical resources they need can be made possible if social workers are assigned to particular communities so they can develop relationships with key service providers. Community resources should provide a continuum of care that includes preventative services and family centered programs such as Family Group Decision Making, Family to Family, Family Preservation and Wraparound. Available resources should also include Therapeutic Behavioral Services (TBS), intervention for pre-delinquent behavior through the S.T.A.R.T. program and Emancipation preparation for youth starting at 14 years and older. It is also important to develop partnerships and support for those who care for our children so that these care providers can nurture the children and children can thrive. Community-based programs would also allow care providers, including relative, foster family homes and group homes the ability to develop the relationships and networks necessary for supportive services such as respite care. This is particularly important for those who care for children with the most difficult problems.

Outcomes

On August 27, 1997, the Board of Supervisors adopted the Children's Planning Council's five identified outcomes for children residing in Los Angeles County. These outcomes include:

1. Good Health
2. Safety and Survival
3. Economic Well Being
4. Social and Emotional Well Being
5. Education and Workforce Readiness

The Commission for Children and Families supports these outcomes. Within each of these broad outcome categories, there are a number of key indicators that need to be developed. For example, in terms of education, some of the indicators are:

- Number of foster children at grade level in reading and math.
- Number of foster children attending pre school.
- Number of foster children graduating with a diploma or GED.
- Number of foster children who are college bound.
- Number of children in trade schools.
- Number of educational services in the community compared to the need.

Indicators for outcomes should be developed and prioritized jointly by states, counties, and community stakeholders.

In response to your question regarding when the public will have a sense that the foster care system is working. The public will have a sense that the foster care system is working successfully when we have developed the outcomes and indicators, then track and evaluate the data for each outcome area. The outcomes and indicators should tell us whether we are on a positive trajectory in terms of foster children's lives. This information should be disseminated and discussed with public and community stakeholders. The format should be simplified so that the task of reviewing the information does not prevent the public from being involved. Some states have elected to do this via their websites.

II. State officials have argued that as a county-administered system, foster care reform requires leadership from county leaders to be effective. Please share with the Commission your thoughts on the progress that Los Angeles County has made in recent years to improve the foster care system and what challenges still must be addressed. Please describe the most pressing challenges that continue to face children and families involved with the foster care system in Los Angeles and how you think they should be addressed.

I concur with state officials that foster care reform requires leadership from county leaders. In addition, it needs support and leadership at the state level. When county leaders develop a vision, particularly one based on innovative changes, the state must be able to work with the county to overcome the obstacles and bureaucracy to help the county achieve their goals.

I have seen Los Angeles County make a number of advances in the several years I have worked in Los Angeles County advocating for foster children. They include but are not limited to:

- Improvements in emancipation preparation and awareness;
- Increased numbers of adoptions through innovative programs with private partners like Adoption Saturdays;
- Creation of both a State and County Ombudsmen for children;
- Implementation of family centered programs such as Family Preservation, Wraparound, and Family Group Decision Making;
- Development of Foster Youth Services created through State legislation and funding;
- Integration of services by county agencies;
- Improvements in oversight and quality of group homes and foster homes through improved contracts and tracking systems;
- Development of the multi-agency S.T.A.R.T. units to prevent youth from moving from the dependency to the delinquency system;
- An increased sense of the value and promise of relatives as the first source of care;
- Development of a contract audit and monitoring system.

Despite these improvements, there is still much work to be done and many of the above programs are not implemented countywide and are not integrated with each other. While there

may be resources in some areas benefiting children, they lack the comprehensive approach needed to foster positive outcomes.

Challenges

Many of the most pressing challenges are addressed earlier in my testimony, and they are:

- To develop a system with **Permanency**.
- To develop indicators for the five **Outcome** areas
- Developing and implementing a continuum of preventive and needs based resources countywide that are integrated with each other. There should be sufficient resources to meet the needs of each family and child in each **Community**.
- **Technology** is another avenue by which child safety, health and academic success can be achieved. There are advancements in technology everyday that would allow us to provide for safety and care for children in a more efficient manner. The current system is incomplete, inefficient, and inaccurate and there are frequently long delays in social workers', doctors', and care providers' ability to obtain critical information. The devastating effects of the current system on the health of a child are outlined in your 1999 Little Hoover Commission report.

Presently, technology is available that would allow us to continue to utilize the CWS/CMS System but to enhance the system with functions that the system lacks. The Internet Health, Mental Health, and Education Passport System Pilot Program passed by the State legislature last year is one of those tools. The Passport system would allow access of key records by doctors, teachers, care providers and social workers. In addition to allowing access to information, the Internet Passport system operates with the ability for doctors, care providers, public health nurses, teachers and social workers to enter information into the system, thus taking the burden off the social workers and freeing them up to perform social work. Timely, accurate educational records are important otherwise children will have long delays enrolling in school or have trouble establishing the number of credits they have for graduation because their records are not available. Having accurate medical records with key people given the ability to access the information would eliminate the risk of over immunizing and of prescribing medication which is contra-indicated to medication a child is taking and a new physician or mental health professional is unaware of. Due to the lack of critical information available to care provides, service providers, and social workers regarding the child, millions of dollars are spent on lawsuits to compensate families for needless tragedies. This money would be better spent by implementing technology aimed at preventing tragedies that impair children's lives or cause their death.

The California State Chapter of the American Pediatrics Association and the largest group home association, in Los Angeles County, the Association of the Children's Health Service Agencies (ACHSA) both wrote a letter in support of the Internet Passport, as did each of our five County Supervisors. State legislators passed and funded the legislation and the Governor signed the legislation. The county agencies and private community are ready to move forward but have been stopped by state and federal bureaucracy.

In addition to providing information on the child's health, mental health and education history, the Internet Passport system through the data it collects is capable of tracking Outcomes in these key areas.

Technology is also available to provide oversight of placements and safety for children. Three years ago, the Foster Care Task Force recommended that the state and county work together to develop an Internet based tracking system that would connect the State Licensing information with the tracking system from DCFS and all County and State Ombudsmen. Tracking this information is important as children currently move not only within a County but also from county to county. This system would allow a tracking and sharing of information and complaints regarding a group home, foster home or relative and the degree of seriousness of each incident reported. Currently this information may be available to one agency and not to another. By developing an Internet system, Community Care Licensing C.C.L. for example, could see when a particular group home had complaints, not only reported to C.C.L. but also complaints received by the L.A. County Auditor Controller, the State Ombudsman and local Ombudsman. Thus in sharing the information and tracking the data, we can determine placements that are not safe and eliminate their use. In so doing, a currently fragmented system is enhanced, thus creating an effective and efficient system. It is also an important oversight and safety tool.

In addition, there are other **Challenges** that will have to be overcome to accomplish our goal, they are:

- The selection of a new director for the Department of Children and Family Services who can meet the challenges of the size and complexity of Los Angeles. The new director needs to have management capabilities to implement programs and services, data collection and develop and track outcome measures. The director must be able to work with and develop relationships with the community stakeholders, advocates and community partners for the best interest of the children. The job of fixing the system cannot be done by one agency but relies on multi county agencies and community involvement orchestrated and coordinated by the Director.
- Identifying and developing appropriate services for foster children who have serious mental health problems, who are dual diagnosed and those who are Regional Center clients. These children need help while they are in foster care but also in their transition out of the foster care system into adulthood. Since the closure of Camarillo State Hospital, Los Angeles County has struggled to develop programs appropriate for these children. E.P.S.D.T. dollars are essential in the development of these sources and programs.
- Los Angeles County should simplify the contracting procedure for the Department of Children and Family Services. Often, the same non-profit agencies apply for contracts from DCFS, DPSS, DMH and Probation. These agencies face four different contracts. In creating a comprehensive community based system, to serve families from prevention to permanency, we must be able to not only blend funding but make it simpler for agencies to serve families without cumbersome contracts that do not share a common language, reporting, monitoring and auditing requirements.
- Too many foster youth are enrolled in special education classes, which do not remediate their educational deficiencies for those youth who are not learning disabled.

- Little or no accountability exists for non-public schools. There is currently great concern about the effect of exit exams for these students.
- DCFS should advocate for Proposition 10 funding for pre-school children in the child welfare system.
- We need services that assist children and their caregivers in providing the best educational programs available, including tutoring.

State assistance is also needed in a variety of areas to accomplish the goals and **Challenges** of Los Angeles County. The State needs to support innovative ideas and programs that will make the system efficient. There is often resistance to change and new ideas. We should never pass up a better way of doing things because of long time commitments to outdated programs or technology.

- The State should support the development of the Internet Health, Mental Health and Education Passport Pilot Program. This can be done by assisting Los Angeles in overcoming the objections listed by the Federal Health and Human Services (H.H.S.) Agency.
- The State should regulate Non Public Schools to ensure a quality education for foster children.
- The State should work with H.H.S. to review the waiver for Wraparound so that it may become a permanent method of funding services to meet the needs of individual children. The State should also eliminate the requirement for a control group in Wraparound to allow all children access to these services. Currently, some children identified as needing Wraparound services are not provided these services so that they can serve as a control group.
- The County should develop and expand programs like S.T.A.R.T. that would prevent dependency children from entering the delinquency system.
- The State should work with State Licensing and group homes on the obstacles that prevent group homes from accepting the most difficult youth.
- The State could assist with Adoptions by streamlining the State requirement for adoption home study assessments. The State should also consider raising adoption assistance payments to encourage more adoptions.
- The State should take the lead on developing the Internet based tracking system for State Licensing and local and state Ombudsman discussed earlier.
- The State should change funding stream so that the money follows the needs of the children and families. Currently, the funding ends with reunification of the family and termination of supervision. Services and after care may be needed to support families staying together, but at this time, there is no funding to support this.
- The State should implement the 1999 recommendation of the Little Hoover Commission to create an Office of Child Services. Los Angeles County has made serious effort to integrate the services of multiple agencies working with children and families such as Department of Mental Health (DMH), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Department of Probation (DP), Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) and Department of Health Services (DHS) to name a few. This has been done through Los Angeles County's Service Integration Branch (SIB), the Interagency Children's

Services Consortium, the S.T.A.R.T. units, the Emancipation Services Design Team, the Children's Planning Council (C.P.C.), Interagency Operations Group (IOG) and others. These efforts are sometimes hampered by funding streams, policy and regulations at the State and Federal level that prevent blending funding or integrating services. If the State restructured itself from agency "silos" to an Office of Child Services that could assist counties and actually encourage an integrated service delivery it would be a very beneficial.

- The State should provide funding and support for the Family Group Decision Making program, to assist families and prevent them from entering foster care.
- The State should continue to fund E.P.S.D.T. without a county match.
- Child outcomes must include education, yet there are no ties on the State and Federal level to the education system. Currently, everyone and therefore no one is in charge of their educational outcomes. Children experience loss of credits, repeat classes, inadequate education, inappropriate classrooms, poor schools and the failure to learn how to adequately read, write or compute. School districts do not devote adequate resources for these children. Social workers and caregivers do not understand how to navigate the educational system. Students are discouraged and disinterested in their own educational outcomes.
- The state should develop a compilation of best practices from the Foster Youth Services program and provide the funding to expand the program.
- The State should develop role modeling on how child welfare and education can work together
- The State should allow decisions regarding safety and risk assessment to be determined by the counties with the largest caseload. L.A. County and some other large counties favored Structured Decision Making process

III. Specifically, how does the Commission evaluate the effectiveness of the foster care system and how does it monitor and report on the progress of reforms? Does the Commission have adequate authority information and tools to be an effective oversight entity and advocate for improvement? If not, what authority, information or tools does the Commission needs to ensure that Los Angeles County has a world-class foster care system?

The Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families was established in April 1984, as the result of a task force on foster care issues. Commissioners are volunteers, many of whom have full time jobs they perform in addition to serving on and/or chairing Commission committees. The Commission performs an important role in the system by being the voice for children. At times, this means pointing out flaws or deficiencies regarding how the system works. The positions taken are not always popular ones, but are necessary advocacy efforts so that children do not get lost in the bureaucracy. Like the Little Hoover Commission, we are constantly pushing and challenging the system to improve.

Authority

The Commission is an advisory group to the Board of Supervisors, and as such has no direct authority to implement programs or changes. The Board on most occasions supports and accepts the recommendations of the Commission and directs DCFS to implement them. The problems arise not from lack of authority or support from the Board, but from past DCFS management unwillingness or inability to implement recommended changes.

Oversight

The Commission provides oversight and evaluates the effectiveness of the foster care system in a number of ways. The Commission meets twice monthly at regularly scheduled meeting. The Commission also convenes and chairs task force and committees that bring recommendation to the Board of Supervisors about important problems and issues affecting children and families, primarily children in foster care and those emancipating from foster care. These Task Forces bring together community partners, stakeholders and county agencies. Some of these Committees include issues on placements, group homes, foster homes, education, emancipation, 300/600, adoption, permanency, relative care provides, and MacLaren Children's Center. A good example of how the Commission's oversight process works is seen through the recent activities involving the redesign of emancipation services. The Emancipation Oversight Committee, chaired by the Commission, brought concerns and recommendations to the Commission regarding the status of emancipation services. The Commission adopted the recommendations and sent them to the Board of Supervisors. Committee members and Commissioners testified at the Board meeting and the Board took action by asking the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to take the lead on correcting the problems. The Commission has actively worked as a member of the C.A.O.'s Emancipation Design Team, to develop a comprehensive emancipation services delivery system. Updates and progress reports come back to the Emancipation Committee and Commission for review (materials attached). I invite you to visit the newly developed website www.ilponline.org. Although still under construction, you can see the direct result of one of the vision put forth by the Commission and the Committee.

It is important to note however, that the Commission is not just an oversight body, but performs a number of vital roles. Attached is a list, which includes some milestones in the Commission's achievements that we feel, improved the lives of children.

Other roles and activities the Commission performs includes:

- Monitoring the implementation process of Board adopted recommendations. For example, the Commission has tracked the progress of the Family Preservation, Emancipation and MacLaren Committees have tracked those programs for 10 years or more.
- Keeps the Board and the Department informed and child focused.

- Advocates for evaluations and accountability data collection and outcomes for programs and services.
- Questions program designs and gives input to the Board of Supervisors for improving design.
- Performs case reviews to establish the difference between policy and actual practice and provides recommendations.
- Provides linkages and facilitation with private sector agencies.
- Facilitates interagency discussion both publicly through Committees and privately.
- Lobbies for legislation.
- Supports the Department in seeking additional state and county funding
- Assists in writing grants.
- Keeps the public informed at meeting proceedings through dissemination of minutes.
- Advises the Board of Supervisors on issues related to dependent and delinquent foster children to their attention.
- Works with the Presiding Judge, Grand Jury, County Agency Directors, and state and federal legislators, bringing important issues related to foster children to their attention.
- Provides opportunities for input from other advocates and community stakeholders during general Commission meetings and committee meetings.
- Brings innovative ideas to the system. In this vein, I have included a concept paper I recently received from Walter Furman, UCLA Professor, long time University Consortium (IUC) evaluator and acting director of the Child and Family Policy Resource Center. While there has been no discussion in the County yet regarding the ideas in the paper, I think it merits review and discussion by all of us. It is consistent with the community-based approach I discussed earlier and address the training needs of social workers.
- Outlines the vision and focus for foster children through recommendations and reform.
- Brings the education, mental health, health and emancipation needs of the children to the forefront.
- Takes a leadership role by providing the impetus for change

In order to be more effective, the Commission needs tools and information pertinent to children. For several years, the Commission has sought accurate data, development of outcomes and evaluation of programs. The Department of Children and Families has over the years been either unable to provide this information or when information regarding data is provided it is incorrect or conflicting. In order to be effective, the Commission needs to be able to judge which programs are working based on more than just anecdotal information. The information should include how many children there are in the system, where they are in the county, what their needs are and if there are sufficient resources in the community to meet their needs. We need to know what indicators for foster children have been developed in each of the five Board approved outcome areas. We need data to know what indicators are being successfully met. Without the key information, it is difficult to know where the Department's planning or focus should be.

Conclusion

In conclusion, **Permanency** and stability are important for children. **Community based** resources and services are vital components to ensure permanency. **Outcomes**, data collection and evaluations are necessary to provide oversight and accountability. **Technology** provides the tools to assist us.

I would like to suggest that Los Angeles County should perform like an orchestra. Agencies, social workers, the State, the Board of Supervisors, advocates, community stakeholders, care providers, service providers, educators and the children themselves each playing a different instrument. The music is most successful and sounds best when an orchestra is playing together as one, not as individuals each playing their own tune. Each orchestra member is important and must be recognized for their role. I believe the development of the orchestra in each community with all of us playing in unison will allow us the best system to care for our children and families. It is incumbent that we must work together to allow each child the opportunity to live a healthy, happy life and successfully reach their potential. Thank you for your time and interest in these important children's issues.

Special Thanks

I would like to thank all of the Commissioners, past and present, Board Deputies and Supervisors and the community partners who have worked with me over the years and taught, supported and influenced me. A special thanks to fellow Commissioners who provided valuable input and support in preparing this testimony: Helen Kleinberg, Carol Biondi, Harriette Williams, Chuck Hurewitz, Sandra Rudnick, G. Lind Taylor and Nina Sorkin. Also community partners Nancy Riordan, Jacquelyn McCroskey, Lisa Mandel, Gail Gronert and Walter Furman. The biggest thanks to both our Executive Director, Dana Williams, for her invaluable assistance and to Elizabeth Hinton who smiled every time I asked her to reorganize the testimony and make "one more change".